UNITED NATIONS

A E

General Assembly
Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

A/52/115
E/1997/47
10 April 1997

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Fifty-second session
Items 101 and 120 of the
preliminary list*
OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES FOR
DEVELOPMENT
JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL
Substantive session of 1997
Item 6 of the provisional
agenda**
COORDINATION, PROGRAMME AND
OTHER QUESTIONS

Coordination of policy and programming frameworks for more effective development cooperation

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to submit to the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council the comments of the Administrative Committee on Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Coordination of policy and programming frameworks for more effective development cooperation" (A/51/636-E/1996/104, annex).

* A/52/50.

** E/1997/100.

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ANNEX

Comments of the Administrative Committee on Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Coordination of policy and programming frameworks for more effective development cooperation"

I. INTRODUCTION

1. As indicated by the Inspector in the introduction to the study, the main purpose of the report is to contribute to the ongoing efforts by Member States to rationalize the operations of the complex network of multilateral development cooperation institutions in order to ensure optimum efficiency, integrated approaches and lower overhead costs in their support of developing countries. The Inspector has based the report on the premise that one way of achieving that objective is to integrate or harmonize to the extent possible the numerous policy and programming institutional formats, mechanisms or frames of reference, defined in the study as "frameworks", which are used by organizations and the donor community to formulate, implement and evaluate their development cooperation policies, strategies, programmes and projects.

2. On the basis of his field investigations and information received in the process of his contacts at the headquarters of a number of organizations, agencies, funds and programmes of the United Nations system, as well as with government officials in developing countries, and the review of current policy frameworks established by the General Assembly, the Inspector supports the view that, against the background of the contracting volume of official development assistance and the resource crisis prevailing throughout the United Nations system, there is an urgent need for more systematic coordination of the organizations' development policies and programmes, and the integrated channelling of catalytic resources towards high-priority needs of recipient countries. The author of the study has made a number of recommendations addressed to the organizations of the United Nations system. Governments of donor and recipient countries and, inter-governmental bodies that are aimed at enhancing coordination of international development cooperation at the national, regional and global levels. Some specific recommendations relate to the system-wide coordination and oversight functions of the Economic and Social Council, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter of the United Nations, in the conduct of international development cooperation.

II. GENERAL COMMENTS

3. The Administrative Committee on Coordination agrees with the Inspector that in an environment of scarce financial resources, when no one can afford to duplicate activities undertaken by different parts of the system, the issue of better coordination is of great importance. Consequently, the United Nations has been engaged in far-reaching reform to that effect for some time. While the report's main focus is on policy and programming frameworks, it also covers a number of related aspects. The substance of the report deals in particular with funds and programmes of the United Nations development system, such as the

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) or the World Food Programme (WFP) that operate within specific country or inter-country frameworks.

4. Thus, while dealing with relevant issues relating to coordination and harmonization of operational activities, the report could have addressed the larger issue of aid coordination in greater depth. Moreover, since the assistance provided from other multilateral and bilateral sources often exceeds by far the volume of the assistance provided through the United Nations system, the report also needed to address that question in greater depth as well.

5. While the report provides an overview and some assessment of the roles and responsibilities of the various development partners involved and of the major instruments developed by the system, it essentially covers familiar ground. The suggestion that the linkage between field realities and global actions can be tenuous and that the implementation of policy directives requires persistent action at various levels is a well-known fact that is being addressed through extensive use of training workshops, seminars and other modalities to link all levels of the system.

6. Members of the Administrative Committee on Coordination agree with the emphasis on the lead role of Governments, which have the main responsibility for the coordination of all external inputs in support of national development. The report rightly indicates a number of areas that are of common concern to the United Nations system. In particular, the multiplicity of programming procedures imposes a considerable burden on Governments. In that context, the report correctly observes that countries having greater needs for assistance, such as the least developed countries, are particularly affected, because of their limited capacity, by the variety of programming policies and procedures, which should, therefore, be streamlined.

7. While the Committee agrees with the general thrust of the conclusions and recommendations and with the Inspector's view that more should be done to improve coordination of the development activities of the United Nations system, it also mentions that the report suffers from a number of shortcomings that diminish its value.

8. In this connection, the Administrative Committee on Coordination notes that the report covers issues in broad areas that have already received considerable attention by the United Nations system, in particular, through the triennial policy reviews by the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council. Moreover, while the subject of the report is important and relevant, its general thrust is primarily to exhort concerned organizations to implement the known provisions of General Assembly resolution 50/120 of 20 December 1995 and other legislation. The findings and recommendations of the report are thus hardly new and many could be found in earlier Joint Inspection Unit reports, in reports of the Secretary-General to the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly and ensuing resolutions, as well as in the numerous proposals submitted to working groups of the Assembly on the reform of the United Nations. They are also being addressed at the inter-agency level, more particularly in the Administrative Committee on Coordination and in the Consultative Committee on Programme and Operational Questions, the Joint Consultative Group on Policy and

so on. It would thus have been more helpful to identify best practices and other practical elements to facilitate implementation at the country level of those established policies.

9. Unfortunately, the report does not take sufficient account of recent developments in the areas under consideration. Moreover, by moving in a general way between various levels - the country, the region, the United Nations system, the intergovernmental process - the report makes insufficient distinctions between operational activities at those levels, and therefore sometimes offers an oversimplified analysis that leads to conclusions and recommendations that, while well intentioned, either have been firmly rejected by Governments outside operational realities or are, in fact, already in the process of being implemented.

10. Consequently, the Administrative Committee on Coordination would like to note that a number of proposals contained in the text of the report, as well as in the recommendations, have been overtaken by events and do not need further comment at the present time.

11. Some members of the Administrative Committee expressed their concern that their preliminary comments on section V of the draft report had not been taken into consideration by the Inspector, which, in their view, had weakened the usefulness of the recommendations made.

III. COMMENTS ON RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1. Country strategy note (paras. 56 and 57)

(a) Host Governments should, with the assistance of resident coordinators as needed, ensure that the Country Strategy Note (CSN) process is used effectively and consistently by all external development partners for the integrated programming and implementation of their inputs in conformity with the programme approach guidelines;

(b) The CSN framework should be encouraged in all countries, with significant involvement of the United Nations system and other major donors, and it should replace or subsume other multisectoral programming frameworks at the country level in order to reduce the cost, frequency and workloads entailed in overlapping country programming exercises; more specific sectoral programmes may be prepared on the basis of the CSN;

(c) Subject to (a) and (b) above, countries with significant structural adjustment programmes financed by the multilateral financial institutions in the context of their policy framework papers (PFP), may either dispense with the CSN or design it to support the efficient implementation of such programmes to enhance the prospects of their success and impact. In that event, the CSN could have the same time-frame as the PFP;

(d) The resident coordinators should fully implement relevant Consultative Committee on Programme and Operational Questions guidelines

regarding agencies without country representation by ensuring their technical contributions to the CSN process;

(e) The Administrative Committee on Coordination should update the policy and operational parameters for the preparation, design and implementation of the CSN, incorporating, as appropriate, the observations and new elements outlined in paragraph 67 herein;

(f) The development cooperation report prepared by the resident coordinators could be used to monitor and report on annual progress in the implementation of the CSN where applicable.

12. Members of the Administrative Committee on Coordination support the proposal contained in recommendation 1 that Governments should make effective and consistent use of the instruments developed by the United Nations system, such as the country strategy note (CSN), to facilitate integrated programming and implementation of development activities and of the services available through the United Nations system. These should include the inputs made by the United Nations agencies at all levels: country, regional, subregional and headquarters.

13. The Administrative Committee on Coordination notes with regret that this recommendation blurs the distinction between the CSN and programming. Thus, the report suggests (para. 61), that the CSN may replace other major programming exercises, while the CSN is not a programming exercise: although it identifies strategic lines and orientations, it does not involve operational programming. On the other hand, the report suggests that recipient Governments may decide to use the CSN instead of other programming frameworks. This idea would need to be very carefully reviewed against existing mandates and operational requirements.

14. Specifically with regard to recommendation 1 (b), on improving the CSN process, the Inspector appears to miss the point of the CSN, viewing it as something that can replace or subsume other programming frameworks. It should be noted, that as a voluntary initiative of recipient countries (General Assembly resolution 50/120, para. 17), the CSN was never intended to replace programming frameworks, but to provide a conceptual and strategic framework for all operational activities of the United Nations system. Since not all countries have agreed to CSNs, and governing bodies of individual funds require separate detailed frameworks, the CSN would not be able to take their place.

15. Members of the Administrative Committee on Coordination accept that the framework for United Nations system inputs is the national development plan or similar national priority-setting document. Therefore, the CSN, where adopted by the Government, is based on the national development plan, which includes programmes to be supported from all sources of funds, domestic and external.

16. The report amplifies and supplements the principles and guidance elements for preparation of the CSN as the principal instrument of achieving coherence in, and coordination of development cooperation initiatives. The CSN, drawing upon the participation of all concerned partners in development, should facilitate efficient programming and delivery of assistance, including that for

capacity-building. The Administrative Committee agrees that the approach to country-level coordination of development cooperation should be collegial.

17. It is the view of the Administrative Committee that the recommendation contained in subparagraph 1 (e), on updating the CSN parameters, is well taken by the author. The question is being reviewed at inter-agency level through the Consultative Committee on Programme and Operational Questions and the triennial policy review.

18. The Administrative Committee on Coordination notes that some improvements in the preparatory process of the CSN are being considered, inter alia, to enable regional commissions to provide a regional dimension to the efforts exerted by the resident coordinators, which should also lead to strengthened linkages between the activities at the regional and national levels.

Recommendation 2. Periodic evaluation of policy and programming frameworks (paras. 11-22)

Each organization should periodically evaluate its technical assistance policy and programming framework(s) to establish their cost-benefits for the host countries and for the organizations themselves, as well as their consistency with the CSN process, programme approach and resource mobilization potential.

19. The Administrative Committee on Coordination in general welcomes the proposal contained in recommendation 2 that each organization should periodically evaluate its technical assistance policy and programming framework(s) to ascertain their costs and benefits. The modality of doing this should be left to the concerned organizations. Moreover, it is important that such evaluations help strengthen the CSN process over time and also help make the development interventions synergistic, cost-effective and more focused.

20. While endorsing the recommendation, members of the Administrative Committee attach particular importance to the efforts of Governments to increase their capacity to coordinate development activities. It would seem, therefore, necessary to link evaluations of United Nations technical assistance to the absorptive capacity of the host Government and to its ability to manage and deliver that assistance on an ongoing basis, considering that national execution is the norm for implementation of United Nations technical assistance. In other words, the question of national ownership must be seen as the corollary of the evaluation of the technical assistance policy and programming frameworks.

21. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has stated that the recommendation concerning the evaluation of the country programme frameworks was found not to be useful for the Agency and it has issued a separate report on the matter.[1]

Recommendation 3. System-wide standard formats for development cooperation (para. 67)

(a) Recognizing the limited implementation to date of existing General Assembly directives in this area, the Administrative Committee on Coordination should intensify its efforts to achieve system-wide standard formats for field data collection, situation analysis or development needs assessments, reporting cycles, evaluation and accountability requirements in order to facilitate joint programming and implementation in furtherance of the programme approach and the CSN process;

(b) Considering the very general character of existing Consultative Committee on Programme and Operational Questions guidelines on the resident coordinator system, the Administrative Committee on Coordination should formulate and agree upon a standard set of more specific and binding administrative instructions to be issued by each executive head to his/her field representatives requiring their active and consistent support for the resident coordinator system, as an integral part of their job descriptions.

Recommendation 4. Inter-agency development information facility (data bank) in the resident coordinator's office (paras. 54 and 55)

In the perspective of recommendation 3 above, and in order to integrate efficiently the existing separate information systems of the organizations at the country level, an inter-agency development information facility (data bank) for each developing country should be established in the resident coordinator's office using a part of the resources earmarked by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Executive Board for strengthening the resident coordinator system. The proposed information facility (data bank) should be fed and maintained by all the organizations in their respective areas of competence and should be accessible, through electronic media, especially the Internet where possible, to the international development community, locally and externally.

22. As can be seen from the context of both recommendations, they make reference to common data banks and data collection at the field level, although the two sets of recommendations do not seem to be related to each other, and, in the view of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, the links between the two should have been clarified in order to establish their operational relevance.

23. With regard to recommendation 3, members of the Administrative Committee agree in principle with the general idea of the proposal contained therein. They agree that the system-wide standardization of data collection, situation analysis and needs assessment is a good idea, provided that any standard formats result from an inventory of best practice within the field of development cooperation and are actively and universally adopted and implemented. Some initial steps were taken to test how best to implement the concept with a particular focus at the present stage on cooperation among the funds and programmes of the United Nations.

24. Members of the Committee note that recommendation 4 does not contain any new ideas, since it has been widely recognized that the programme approach requires inter-agency collaboration in the field at various stages of programme development and implementation. This is the essence of the current Administrative Committee on Coordination guidelines on the programme approach. To the extent that the Joint Inspection Unit's report encourages collaborative programming and implementation based on the programme approach concept and the framework provided by the CSN, this is consistent with relevant intergovernmental directives and Administrative Committee on Coordination agreements. An essential basis for collaborative programming and implementation is a common data bank.

25. With regard to paragraph 54 of the report, which has served as a basis for recommendation 4, some members of the Administrative Committee point out that the establishment of a common database is being implemented and guidelines are under preparation in the subgroup on harmonization of policies and procedures of the Joint Consultative Group on Policy. To date, over 80 countries have expressed interest in proceeding with the development of common data banks. The specific objective is to achieve a common country assessment by the members of the Joint Consultative Group of which a common database is a centrepiece. Efforts are being initiated to include other parts of the system in the exercise. In that connection, it is necessary to ensure that the limited resources that are available for development cooperation activities are not dissipated through the establishment of new systems, which may duplicate the important work that is already being carried out by the organizations of the United Nations development system. There is therefore a need to assess realistically the technical, cost and other resource implications for establishing and maintaining the databases. Thought should also be given further to assist interested Governments in establishing such a database that would directly enhance their capacity to exercise their coordination role.

26. On a related point, the Inspector seems not to be aware that the funds allocated by UNDP to the resident coordinator function would be insufficient to cover the basic assignment of the resident coordinator, let alone leave some over for other activities, as suggested by the report.

Recommendation 5. Field-level coordination committees (paras. 48-51)

In addition to the meetings of all external development partners, country-level coordination committees, sectoral subcommittees and thematic working groups and task forces should be used more systematically, with the necessary technical inputs of headquarters, regional and/or subregional offices, as mechanisms for policy dialogue and for the integrated development of country and sectoral programmes.

27. It should be noted that this recommendation is essentially a repetition of paragraphs 36 and 41 of General Assembly resolution 50/120 regarding field-level coordination committees, which are in the process of being implemented in accordance with the management process on the subject submitted to the substantive session of 1996 of the Economic and Social Council. Moreover, such cooperation at the field level is already operational in several countries.

notably in the preparation of donors' round-table conferences, and in responding to thematic issues.

Recommendation 6. Regional and subregional coordination (paras. 68-75)

(a) Cooperation between the regional commissions and other organizations of the system should continue to include the mutual review of draft regional strategies and programmes of cooperation;

(b) In order to enhance the national ownership of inter-country programmes, the organizations should establish strong linkages between country and inter-country programmes, inter alia, by supporting institutional networks within each economic cooperation grouping in the different regions, and by promoting the implementation of the decisions of such groupings at the country level in the context of the CSN and country programming processes;

(c) All the organizations should endeavour to harmonize their regional programme cycles in consultation and coordination with the regional commissions.

28. In supporting recommendation 6, members of the Administrative Committee on Coordination underline that they maintain close working relationships with international, regional/subregional and national organizations and research institutions for consultation and coordination of development activities. At the same time, they would like to note that recommendation 6 refers to strategies and programmes of cooperation at regional and subregional levels that do not seem to exist or still have a very limited diffusion. In fact, the reason for including a regional dimension in General Assembly resolution 50/120 was specifically aimed at expanding such a dimension. This provision of the resolution is in the process of being implemented for review by the Economic and Social Council in July 1997.

29. The provisions of subparagraph (a) are being effected through such mechanisms as the Regional Inter-agency Committee for Asia and the Pacific under the chairmanship of the Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), and its subsidiary committees, which discuss specific programme cooperation and coordination issues to follow-up on regional strategies and plans or programmes of action.

30. As for subparagraph (b), annual consultations are carried out between the Executive Secretary of ESCAP and the heads of subregional intergovernmental bodies, namely, the Association of South-East Asian Nations, the Economic Cooperation Organization, the South Pacific Commission and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, to discuss measures for cooperation in identified areas such as trade and investment, transport and communications, human resource development and energy.

31. With regard to subparagraph (c), it is important to recall that not all organizations operate at a regional level and that those which do are already addressing the points raised by the recommendation. UNDP, for example, has

established a bilateral working group with the regional commissions, chaired by the Associate Administrator.

32. In the view of the members of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, it would be useful if the regional programme cycles of all organizations of the United Nations development system, including the regional commissions, could be harmonized. What is important is to ensure that the scarce resources that are available to the system are not thinly spread. In that regard, the view contained in paragraph 75 of the report, namely, that the regional commissions serve as the main development forum for reviewing and interconnecting the different sectoral and cross-sectoral regional programmes of the organizations, in draft form, prior to approval by the governing bodies, deserves further consideration. The current situation in which individual governing bodies determine their own sets of priorities for the same region, have resulted in inconsistencies and caused confusion; it also hampers positive action by the United Nations development system as a whole. A consistent set of priorities in development cooperation on the part of Member States, coupled with enhanced coordination and genuine cooperation among the organizations of the United Nations development system, would enhance efficiency and the cost-effectiveness of development cooperation and would contribute to achieving results that truly benefit the developing countries.

33. Thus, for instance, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), pursuant to recent calls by the Secretary-General for coordination of activities of the United Nations system at the regional level, initiated consultations with regional offices of the United Nations entities based in and outside Jordan, which has led to the establishment of a regional inter-agency coordination group.

Recommendation 7. Role of the Economic and Social Council (paras. 76-83)

(a) The Economic and Social Council should further strengthen its coordination and oversight functions under the Charter, by exploring, as a first step, the practical feasibility of instituting/expanding joint sessions, together with a common agenda, of the executive boards of the United Nations programmes and funds for the consideration of specific coordination issues, including, inter alia, CSNs and country programmes, and the specialized agencies may be invited to participate in such sessions as they may deem appropriate;

(b) The next step could be the creation of a unified or single executive board as a committee of the Council while preserving the identities and mandates of the programmes and funds concerned;

(c) In connection with (a) and (b) above, the Council may request the relevant United Nations programmes and funds to intensify efforts to achieve a standard format for the formulation and presentation of their development cooperation programmes and related budgets, in order to strengthen cross-organizational linkages and coherence;

(d) Furthermore, the Council should assign priority to seeking system-wide conformity with General Assembly resolutions relating to

coordination issues in the economic, social and related sectors through specific recommendations thereon to the governing bodies of the specialized agencies.

34. The Administrative Committee on Coordination would like to point out that the provisions of recommendation 7 enter into political areas that are the domain of Member States, which recently agreed to General Assembly resolution 50/227 of 24 May 1996, as a first step in reforms at this level.

35. Members of the Administrative Committee note that the funds and programmes of the United Nations system have made considerable progress, in particular, on joint sessions of their governing bodies and also on common reporting formats to the Economic and Social Council, as suggested in recommendation 7. Moreover, the proposals contained in subparagraphs (b) and (c) refer to actions that have already been taken by the Council.

36. While recommendation 7 is addressed primarily to the Economic and Social Council and United Nations programmes and funds, there are specific suggestions in the text of the report that relate to the specialized agencies. Certain Committee members therefore point out that they have a broad mandate in technical and normative fields beyond the scope of the operational activities that are of direct interest to the Council.

37. Some members of the Committee have strong reservations as to the feasibility of joint meetings and, as the next step, a move towards a single executive board under the Council to govern the United Nations programmes and funds, and the proposal concerning joint reporting by the executive boards, since, in their view, such recommendations have considerable implications for the funds and programmes and their governing bodies. The specific questions raised in that regard are, for instance, whether all the 36 members of the WFP Board should come to New York to participate in a joint session of the UNDP/United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNICEF Boards, or whether missions of 72 members of the boards of the New York-based funds and programmes to WFP headquarters in Rome would be required. Serious doubts concerning joint reporting are based on the need to clear those reports by all the boards of the funds and programmes, which would need four separate sessions of the respective governing bodies.

38. The Administrative Committee on Coordination looks forward to further guidance from the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council in the future concerning all the proposals contained in recommendation 7 of the Joint Inspection Unit report.

Notes

[1] IAEA/SER/96/01.